

FRONTMENADE

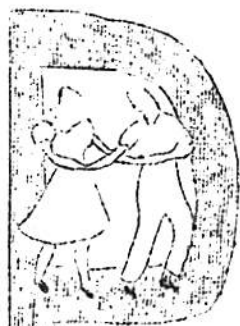
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PROMENADE

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"The purpose of the American Square Dance Group is to make available those rich stores of native dance, music, drama and general Americana which together comprise American folk culture; to conduct such activities without regard for race, creed, color or social position; to cooperate with those who hold similar views."

Constitution of the A. S. D. G.

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Folklore is such an all inclusive and magnetic subject that often it is necessary for the folklorist to limit himself to one branch of folklore if he wishes to acquire a thorough knowledge of his hobby. To choose among the intriguing subjects is indeed difficult, for they are so interwoven that it is seemingly impossible to separate one branch from another.

The most obvious and perhaps most attractive divisions in the folklore field are singing and dancing, but even these cannot be segregated from the study of the people from whom they sprang. The history of the people, their customs, traditions, superstitions, work, living conditions and religions are all so much a part of their songs and dances that it is impossible to disregard these subjects. Almost impossible, that is, for one can participate in a song or dance without being aware of the background of the dances and songs, but how exciting it is to piece together the little scraps of information that research reveals, -and the result is a tapestry, a mosaic that is constantly changing as you readjust your conclusions and increase your store of knowledge.

Folklore is a living art, growing and accumulating information, real and fantastic, and it is imperative for the student to have a basis on which to work, a foundation on which to build. This is as important to the student of folklore as it is for the student of any other subject. Improvisation requires first a knowledge of the fundamental rules, -and there are basic facts in folklore which correspond to rules of grammar or harmony in literature and music.

These facts are the backgrounds of our early and later settlers; their economic and social positions abroad and here; the political history of the various ethnic groups; the geographic barriers and conditions of the different sections of our country; the religious convictions of the settlers. These and other facts form the platform on which even the amateur folklorist can build his studies. The improvisations begin with a commingling of the various ethnic groups, with improvements in transportation and communication, with the availability of printed materials. Lack of these improvements in certain regions also plays a part in the development of our American folklore.

(continued on next page)

THE SCHOMBURG COLLECTION

Marie Cuba

On the third floor of the 115th St. branch of the N. Y. Public Library is the Schomburg Collection of Negro literature, — a library dedicated to the preservation, study, and popularization of Negro history and culture. This collection is the life work of Arthur Alfonso Schomburg, a great American collector. Schomburg, of Negro descent, was born in Puerto Rico in 1874. He searched the book stores in Latin America, western Europe, and the U.S. for material on the Negro. In 1926 the Carnegie Corp. presented the collection to the N.Y. Public Library. Schomburg himself, served as curator until his death in June, 1938.

The literature of the collection is devoted to the Negro, not only in the United States, but also in every section of the globe where Negroes lived in numbers. All the works of the major and minor American Negro writers are here. These deal with war, peace, politics, labor, history, science and last, but not least, folklore.

Dr. Lawrence Dunbar Reddick, the present curator, showed us a paper that he had written which will be published in a future issue of the N. Y. Folklore Quarterly. The article is entitled, "Resources of the Schomburg Collection of Negro literature for the study of folklore", and which will be worth reading when available."

Most of the folklore section of the Schomburg Collection concerns the Negro of the U.S. Some titles include: Gumbo Ya-ya; Voodoo Tales as told among the Negroes of the Southwest; The Conjur Woman, by Charles L. Chestnutt; Old Mammy Tales From Dixie; Uncle Remus; and numerous versions of the John Henry legend. There is a long shelf of folksongs including collections by John L. Work, T. J. Talley, Frederick Hall, John and Alan Lomax, Dorothy Scarborough, N. I. White, James Weldon, and J. Rosamund, to mention just a few.

The library also contains a

small museum, which among other things, exhibits an African tomtom, a Haitian drum, three African harps, violins and a xylophone from Liberia with mahogany keys and gourds as sound chambers. In addition there are many valuable phonograph records that should prove to be interesting.

Though the collection's main intention is to encourage collection of Negro lore, one can learn much by a visit. The library is open from 9 A.M. to 9 P.M. daily except Sundays and holidays.

(first of a series of articles)

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Because these branches of folk history are important to us in the American Square Dance Group, we're making an effort to learn as much as we can about these basic facts and to absorb the background of the peoples of our country. We feel that there is much more to folklore than has been presented to the general public. That's one reason why our radio song group is singing songs that most singers of folk songs do not present. These commercial performers are forced to offer only the material which "appeals to the public" and are thus hampered in any attempts to bring forth more unusual songs.

Hence, the numerous albums of recorded folk songs containing the most "popular" songs, repeating the same songs over and over with only slight variations. Hence, too the "corny" square dance calls and music which so completely snow under the genuine beauty and humor of our dances, and give the public the idea that American dances are rough and tumble affairs with embarrassingly silly calls and common, uninteresting music.

Let us endeavor, those of us who have encountered the beauty, the real humor, the pathos of American folklore, to spread this knowledge to as large an audience as possible, so that modern Americans can be aware of their folk heritage and proud of the contributions of the ethnic groups who built our country.

GEORGE THOMSON

Israel Young

George Thomson will always be remembered in the field of folklore as one of the first men interested in preserving the music of a people, and as the most persevering, enthusiastic and successful collector of the songs of Ireland, Scotland and Wales, a work that he began early in life and to which he devoted most of his time and money till his death at the age of ninety-four in 1851.

Thomson's method of collecting folk songs and melodies was quite different from that of the collector today. He was not interested in pleasing the antiquarian and scholar with the oldest versions of airs, but rather to change them to something more pleasing to the public by making them melodious and easy. This aim must always be kept in mind if any judgment is to be made of his work.

When he collected original airs such as his "Four Sets of Scottish Songs" 1793-1797, he proposed to publish "all the fine airs both of the plaintive and lively kind, unmixed with trifling and inferior ones." He also had texts written to these melodies by such great poets as Boswell and Scott. The title page reads "A correct and elegant Repository of our national Melodies with delicate accompaniments and suitable Poetry."

As to instrumental accompaniments, Thomson's method was very new and bold. Besides the piano arrangement each song was to have a prelude and postlude for violin or for flute and violincello, the composition of which was to be entrusted to none but the best composers, who were mostly Continental Europeans. For this reason Thomson is still unforgiven by many scholars in Britain.

At different times he engaged such composers as Kozeluch, Weber, Hummel, Haydn and Beethoven, and it is to Thomson that we are indebted for the Irish music ar-

ranged by Beethoven (1810-1813). Several new records made of this collection are reviewed on another page of this issue.

It was Burns who persuaded Thomson to publish a separate set of Irish melodies, and who graciously offered to write new texts for the melodies. This resulted in two volumes that appeared between the years 1814-1816.

In Wales, Thomson attempted to collect the melodies played by the Welsh Harpists and adapt them to voice. He had many helpers from all over Wales who sent him melodies, but to make sure of their authenticity he went himself to many harpists to correct the manuscripts sent to him and to gather such melodies as were neglected by them. This would seem peculiar in a man whose avowed purpose was to change folk melodies so as to make them satisfactory for popular consumption. Very few of the melodies had texts, so in order to make it possible to add texts he cut out monotonous repetitions and also many ornaments and divisions of the harpist; but he did not change the tune.

The first composers commissioned by Thomson were Kozeluch and Pleyel, who composed the melodies for the first two sets of Scottish songs. His next and favorite composer was Haydn who arranged volumes three and four. When in 1803, Haydn was too sick to continue his work, Thomson wrote to him that he could not even dream of looking for an inferior composer to finish a work so nearly finished by him. Thomson might never have commissioned Beethoven if Haydn had not become so ill. The first commission fell through because Beethoven asked for twice as much as Thomson offered. Many other possible commissions were never undertaken because of the excessive fees asked for by Beethoven. Beethoven would also refuse to retouch any of his work, or he would charge prohibitive fees; and as Thomson paid for everything out of

his own money, many such changes had to be foregone.

When they were working together Beethoven was given full liberty to change and edit the tunes. In regard to this, Benedict in his "Life of Weber" writes that "Thomson's idea was not a happy one. Had he told the great composers that he wished to have the harmonies (which were sometimes incorrect and awkward) edited and altered, without changing the simplicity and the originality of the piece, the result would have been quite different. But leaving them full liberty to add and modify as they liked, the result was that the very essence of the originals was often changed, and it is difficult to recognize them." In fact, the Encyclopedia Britannica of the day described the accompaniments as incongruities and non-strosities.

Very often Beethoven would ask Thomson for the words of some particular melodies as that would change his method of treatment. About as often Thomson could only reply that they were still in the brain of the poet he had gotten to write the text. Beethoven wrote to Thomson "How is it that you a connoisseur, cannot understand that I should produce quite differently if I had the text before me?..... If you do not comply with my request, you will compel me to refuse further commissions." Many of the songs are strained for this reason; he would send one text of a melody to a poet to write a text for it, and at the same time he would send a copy to a composer to edit and alter, -and still expect complete success all the time.

Thomson had many complaints against Beethoven. Too many of his works were too difficult for the amateur player for whom the work was intended. "Not one man in a hundred could play such music" to which Beethoven curtly replied that he would not have written the music if he had known that there were so many poor players in Scot-

land! When Beethoven wrote a piece in a particularly tempestuous style, Thomson wrote "Our Scotch ladies can't surely be as strong as yours."

Thomson also had trouble from his poets. James Thomson writes "Well may you speak of botheration of song-writing when Melodies of a particular measure are presented to the poet." Robert Burns, his chief contributor, wrote "There is a peculiar rhythm in many of our airs and a necessity of adapting syllables to the emphasis, or what I should call the feature note of the tune, that cramp the poet and lay him under insuperable difficulties."

Thomson made many other collections in his lifetime that are still used as standard reference books. He also was the originator of the Edinburgh Music Festival. One of his daughters was married to George Hogarth, a composer who also did some work for Thomson, and his grand-daughter was married to Charles Dickens. It is interesting to note that Dickens himself wrote the epitaph for Thomson, and that they lie next to each other.

Though Thomson was interested in folksongs purely from the commercial viewpoint, he still saved from extinction many songs that would otherwise have been lost.

Thomson's collection is very valuable today, but when Thomson needed money very badly, he could hardly find anyone willing enough to buy the copyrights for only 150 pounds, -and the person who bought them hardly made his money back on them. So folksong collectors need not worry about their condition any longer; they are just as unappreciated now as they were in the good old days.

THE END

The next issue of Promenade will have a special article on Francis James Child, the great collector of the traditional Ballad.



IRISH SONGS

Richard Dyer-Bennet

The Concert Hall Society Album A-G contains six Irish folksongs arranged by Beethoven for tenor (Richard Dyer-Bennet) and piano trio (Ignace Strassfogel, piano; Stefan Frenkel, violin; and J. Bernstein, cello). Here is a good combination of the classical form with the traditional folk song in a pleasing quartet of voice and instruments. The "early" Beethoven accompaniments provide a pleasing complement to the voice and Mr. Dyer-Bennet solicits an Irishman's knowing smile of approval in such songs as "The Pulse of an Irishman" and "The Morning Air Plays on my Face." In a possible attempt to blend the voice with the instruments, much of Mr. Dyer-Bennet's characteristically precise diction is sacrificed. This loss, however, is compensated for by the overall tonal quality. These six songs are only a small number of the series of different national folk songs that Beethoven arranged for the Thomson collection. Many of the lyrics were edited and written by such authors as Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott.

A new field can be seen for the ambitious folklorist as to one of the possibilities of the folksong. One of the most gratifying facts of this album is the absence of the run-of-the-mill folksongs, recorded in many of the latest folk albums. Herein lies its instructive value for those interested in research in the folklore field, for here it is hardly necessary nor admirable to "keep up with the Joneses." As one gets below the surface of such songs as the blue-tailed fly, one asks himself if folklore is unrelated to the people and their common problems. One may also ask if this album can be fully understood and appreciated without a knowledge of the forces

that molded these folk songs or of the life of Beethoven himself.

Coming back to the album, one may possibly dislike the strained quality in Mr. Dyer-Bennet's voice which seems to be due in part to the pitch required by the accompaniment and in part to the range required by the songs themselves. We will leave this for you to decide upon hearing the album.

In closing we can only say that this unique combination creates a delightfully charming album which leaves you with the sort of exalted feeling one gets from listening to chamber music. Inasmuch as Beethoven arranged many other Irish songs we hope that Concert Hall Society will deem it worthwhile to record more of them in the near future.

Dance Caravan, the theatrical folk dance group in New York, has been covering considerable ground lately with theatre engagements, television broadcasts and whatnot. And the press has been giving them a break. But there is a fly in the ointment; a shortage of men. So if you think you can make the grade, hie yourself over to Goddard House 599 First Ave., at 8 PM any Monday night and they'll tell you all about it.

AMERICAN SQUARES

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We have been glad to answer many of our readers queries on folklore and we welcome more of them. It will be greatly appreciated if you include a stamped envelope.